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New connections and partnerships: seeking and finding collaborations

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What is a partnership? What is a collaboration?

For now, let's consider partnership or collaboration as agreements on achieving a shared goal. Roget's Thesaurus invites us to think of these other words associated with collaboration: coercion, cooperation, synergy, teamwork.

Then, let's assume that partnerships/collaborations are good things. That is, it is within our patron's best interests, our institution's best interests, and our own best interests to be involved in a collaboration.

In many ways, my life is a collaboration. Over the last ten years I served on boards of organizations and projects. These currently include formal appointments with these outside collaborations:

1. WGBH-Boston. I currently serve as a consultant and advisor for a television series that will be on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in April 2009.
2. Editor, The American Indian Experience, Greenwood Publishing Group.
3. International Children's Digital Library. Advisory Board, 2002-.
4. WebJunction.org. OCLC. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Public Access Computing Portal, Advisory Committee, 2002-.
5. School of Information Resources & Library Science, University of Arizona. Knowledge River Grant. Steering Committee, Member, 2001-2005, 2007-.
6. Sequoyah Research Center. Advisory Board, 2001-.
7. "Tribal Libraries, Archives, and Museums: Preserving our Language, Memory, and Lifeways: National Conference," National Envisioning Committee, Member, 2001-.
8. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar Foundation, Advisory Board, member.

9. Director, "If I Can Read, I Can Do Anything," a national reading club for Native children.
10. Principal Investigator, "Honoring Generations": Developing the Next Generation of Native Librarians, funded by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services.

I also have continuing conversations with organizations such as Reading is Fundamental (RIF) and the Lance Armstrong Foundation.

I became involved in these collaborations by following unique paths. In some cases, I was recommended by others. In most cases, the collaborations came about as a result of long-standing contact. In two cases, I created the collaborations.

How, then do we identify potential collaborations?

A. Identify current collaborations

1. Review information about grant funders. Find out who recently received funding from the organization. Send these funders congratulations notes with offers to help.
2. Review the list of organizations, including foundations, that provide gifts to your professional organizations. Contact these foundations and the recipients, thanking them and offering your assistance, if needed.
3. Volunteer to serve on review committees for grant funders. Some grant funders have an open application process.
4. Watch the media for news about new initiatives that interest you.
5. Attend social events where potential collaborators gather. Make sure that you have your business cards at hand and can succinctly summarize your skills and interests.
6. Read information distributed by universities, taking note of independent research units, research labs, and special institutes, including ethnic studies centers. Find out about their goals, their new programs, and attend events where they share information about their vision and work.
7. Create a list of organizations outside of yours that share similar goals.
8. Review the resumes and records of people you consider successful. What collaborations were they involved with?
9. What collaborations are available through your regular professional organization? What collaborations are ongoing? Which are new efforts?

B. Develop your own collaboration

1. Write the one sentence vision statement of your ideal collaboration? What would this collaboration do? Who would be involved? What resources would be needed?

C. Once you have identified current collaborations that interest you, make yourself known.

This approach involves a self-alerting mechanism to become aware of on-going or short-term efforts. Some call this approach a matter of making sure that you have a place at the table.

Most high-profile efforts have advisory boards. Some boards are elected, some are appointed, and few have permanent appointments. Thus, most boards follow some process of refreshing their roster. In many cases, these boards are seeking new members who can contribute to achieving their goals.

Review any application process. Meet deadlines and supply the information requested. Resist submitting supplemental information or from badgering the decision makers.

Seek ways to make your voice known. Apply to give presentations at conferences. Volunteer to organize events. Write articles for newsletters or journals. Manage a lively and successful blog. Develop a FaceBook community. Speak to the media. Go to the microphone at public events. Develop a skill that you could contribute to a collaboration. Can you design a website, manage a blog, create a webinar, conduct a survey, oversee evaluation? Can you speak or write about a collaboration?

Finally, let me add a few words of advice on working successfully on collaborations.

Be prepared to exchange your partnership with work.

The most valuable attribute you have is your good name. Use it prudently.

Build on your reputation of being a productive, hard-working contributor. Ideas are a dime a dozen: can you bring an idea to a tangible product within a reasonable period of time? Can you work well with others.

Ask questions. Find out what you can ask for, in terms of types of support. Prepare to make your ask. If you need to, invite someone to make the ask for you. It is possible that a potential partner just does not know that you are available.

Be a good advocate for your collaboration. Share your good news.

Share in the achievements of the group and help understand and improve on any setbacks.

Say thank you. And you can do this in many ways: verbally, in writing, by remembering what motivates your new partner, by including them in the next opportunity.

I am now off to my next collaboration: the final meeting of the IFLA Presidential Commission on Indigenous Matters. Stay in touch and feel free to share with me your stories of your collaborations.